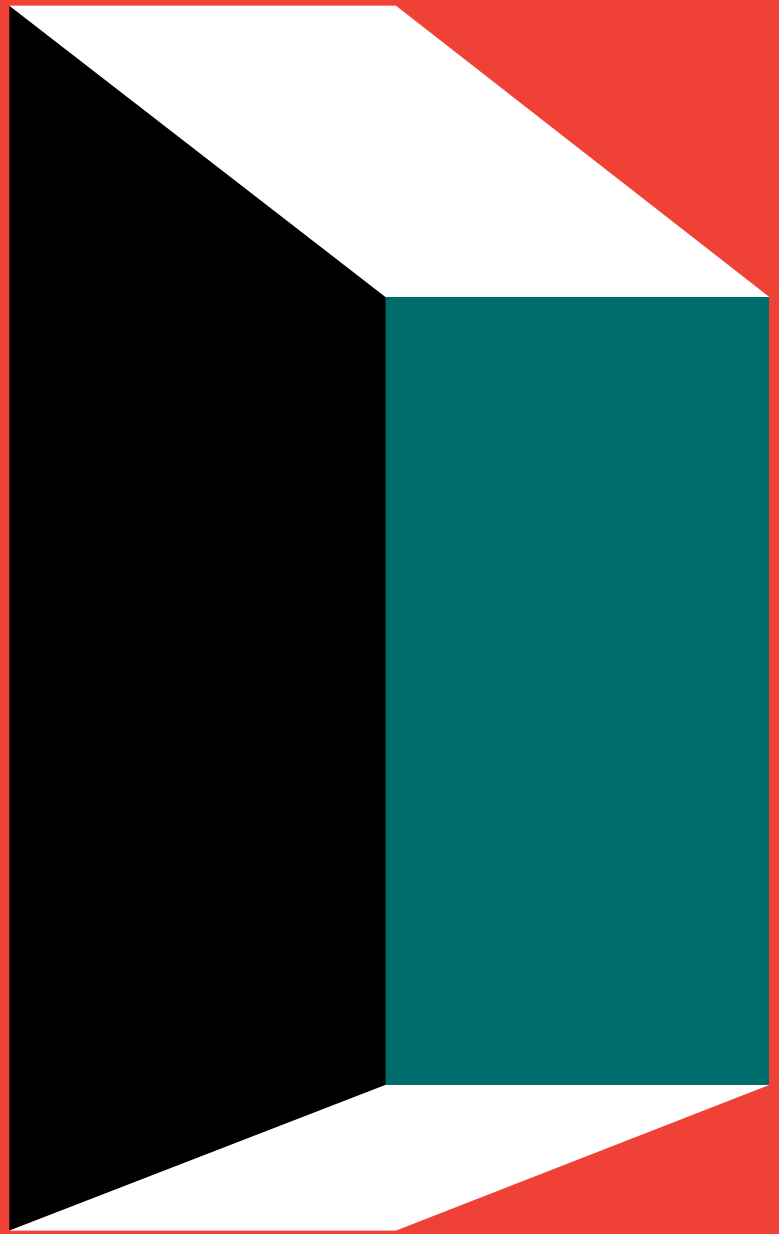
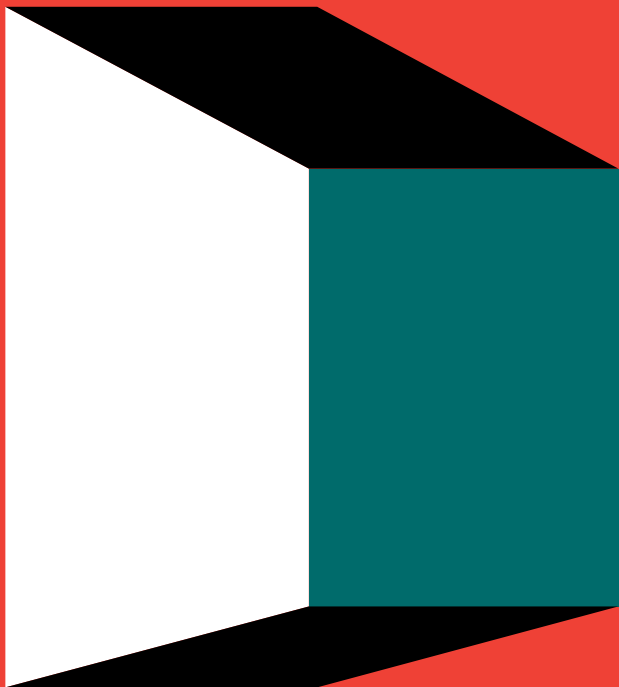
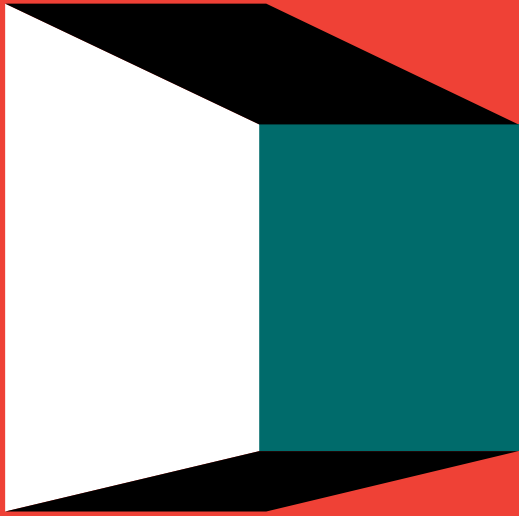
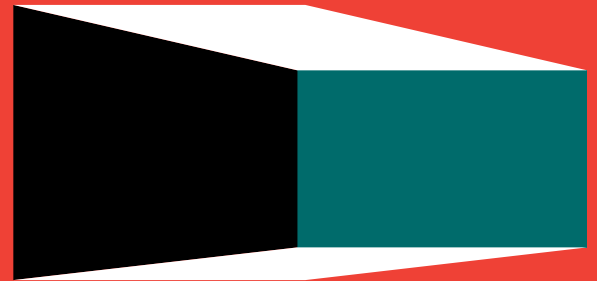


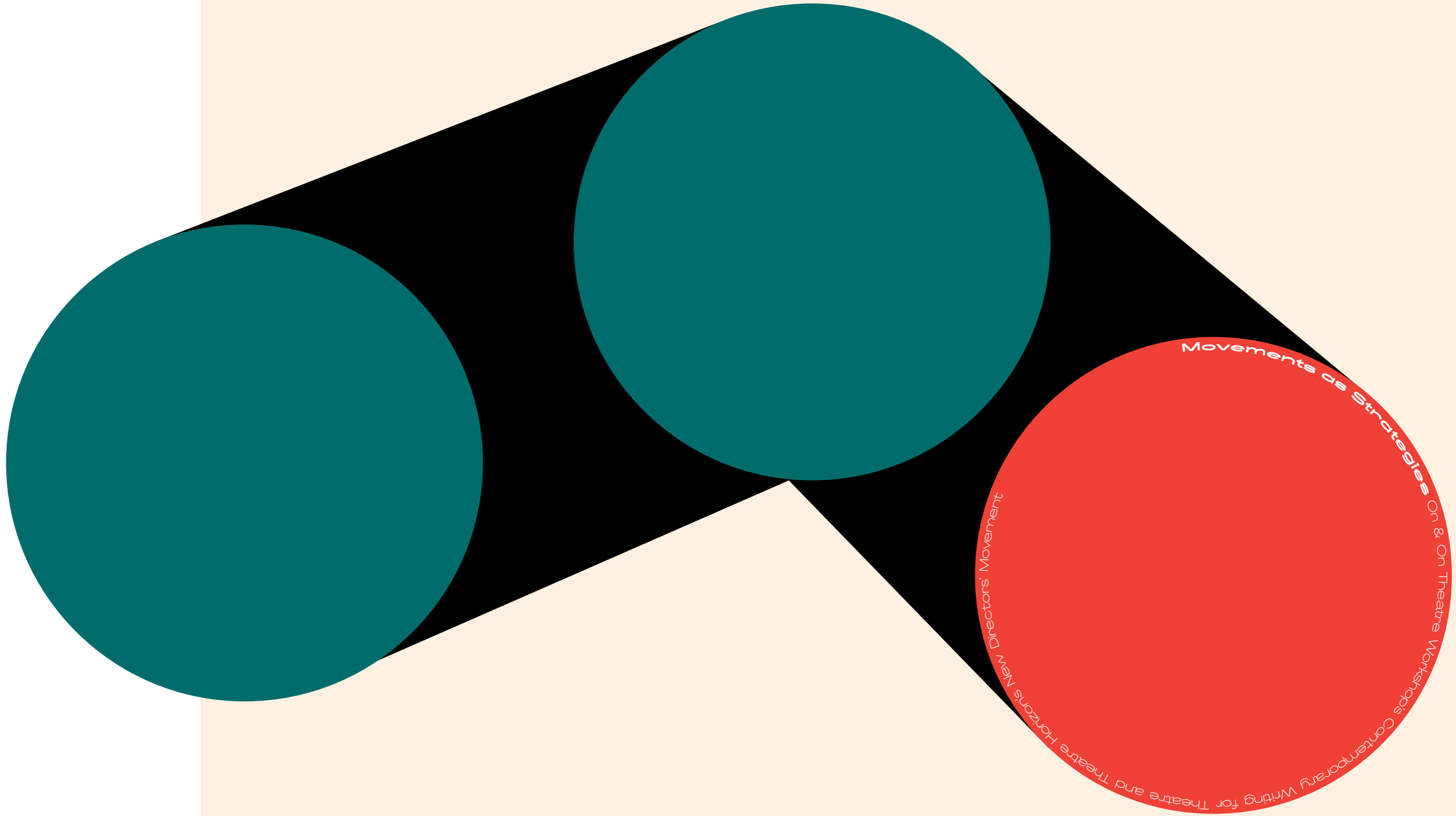
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Movements as Strategies

On & On Theatre Workshop's Contemporary Writing for Theatre and Theatre Horizon's New Directors' Movement

Text
Bernice Chan

At the end of 2018, Theatre Horizon broadcasted the awards ceremony of the New Directors' Movement on Facebook live. Chan Chu-hei, the mastermind behind the New Directors' Movement and the MC of the event, took the opportunity to explain that the programme could be better understood as a "movement", not as a mere "project".¹ Delivered in a casual tone, Chan's remark was nevertheless a reaffirmation of a manifesto. A movement, as we know it, is devoted to a cause—it unites people who share the same vision and advocate for it, or who seek to create change in the world. Indeed, it is more imaginative and inspiring to call it a movement rather than a project.

Theatre Horizon is a theatre company funded by the Hong Kong Arts Development Council (HKADC) and its New Directors' Movement, which was in turn sponsored by the HKSAR Government's Arts Capacity Development Fund Scheme (ACDFS). Launched in 2017, the movement consisted of four phases over the course of two years. Four new directors, namely Chow Wai-chuen, Donald Chung, Wong Chun-ho and Tang Ho-wai, were each to present a rendition of a Western theatre classic at a different medium-sized venue. For funded arts groups who wish to undertake projects of this scale, the ACDFS is one of the alternatives to funding from the HKADC. While it falls within the Home Affairs Bureau's resources structure, the scheme is known for accommodating diversity and creativity, and for the relatively generous funding amount that it offers (which was capped at HK\$ 2 million in 2017). Therefore, the ACDFS is a better option for medium-scale projects of unique visions that tap into the needs of the local theatre ecology.

On & On Theatre Workshop, another HKADC-funded theatre company, introduced Contemporary Writing for Theatre in 2012. Coincidentally, the project was named a "movement" in Chinese, and it was also financially supported by the ACDFS. Since 2006, On & On Theatre Workshop has

¹ See the Facebook page of The New Directors' Movement for the video recording of the ceremony, 24 December 2018: <https://www.facebook.com/newdirectorsmovement/videos/2184073061857153/>

been dedicated to introducing contemporary European dramatic works into Hong Kong's theatre scene. Drawing on the foundation of the company's long-term research, the first phase of the movement (2012-2014) covered theatre production, art appreciation, research and translation, and publication. The second phase (2015-2019) focused on "local transformation", targeting "original works and theatre performances, putting the theories and learning from the first phase into practice".² Four emerging local playwrights, namely Miu Law, Fong Ki-tuen, Li Chi-tat, and Birdy Wong Ching-yan, were invited to present their works in the play readings at the New Writing Lab 2.0 in late 2017. The new scripts were the result of over a year's research and creative processes. The four works are: *All is Goodness*; *Stones, Broken Branches, and the Black Dog*; *The Insect Classroom*, and *Dandelions Taking Heroin*. They are diverse in subjects and styles, touching on social movements, the relationship between home and existence, and those who are marginalised in society. Fong developed *Stones, Broken Branches, and the Black Dog* into *A Fork in the Road*, which was staged by On & On Theatre Workshop in 2019. It was the second theatre production that originated from the New Writing Lab 2.0. The first one was *The Phenomenon of Man: REVOLVER* by Wu King-yeung; it was originally presented at the previous phase of New Writing Lab 2.0 in 2015, and subsequently staged as a theatre production in 2017.



All is Goodness (2017) — Photo: Lotus Chan Photo courtesy: On & On Theatre Workshop

² Launched in 2012, Contemporary Writing for Theatre by On & On Theatre Workshop is still ongoing. Details of the third phase are yet to be announced: <https://www.onandon.org.hk/contemporary-writing-for-theatre>

As well as having different targets, the New Directors' Movement and Contemporary Writing for Theatre departed from conventional artist development initiatives in their conceptions. Since its launch, the fruits of Contemporary Writing for Theatre have been seen in different manifestations over the past years. The practice of "local transformation" was a key focus which targeted the development of new Hong Kong playwrights. Both movements sought to tackle the blind spots that might hinder long-term artistic development in the local theatre ecology. Both theatre companies combined research with creative work, and theory with practice, as experienced artists created platforms for newcomers to shine. With the support from the theatre companies, individual artists could produce impactful works in a collaborative and sustainable mode. It has helped theatre artists to move beyond the blind spots, as it has fostered a new wave of creative energy. In this sense, both movements catered to the needs of emerging artists first, and the theatre companies' development and audience building second.

Chan Ping-chiu, the curator of Contemporary Writing for Theatre, was born in the 1960s. He was in the first graduation cohort of the Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts (HKAPA). The year 2018 marked the 20th anniversary of On & On Theatre Workshop. As early as in 2006, Chan saw, from his vantage point as an artistic director, the possibilities of "confronting reality" and "creating new narratives" in local theatre writing and theatre making. Since these strategies and concerns were only beginning to emerge in the local theatre scene, they were not perceived as pressing among theatre makers at the time. When Chan started to introduce works of contemporary European theatre into Hong Kong, a number of local theatre makers joined On & On Theatre Workshop in exploring different texts and theatre making modes within the framework of the company's productions. These artists included Vee Leong, Janice Poon, Melissa Leung and Alex Cheung, who grew up in the 1980s and who share a deep interest in theatre research. Therefore, when Contemporary Writing for Theatre was officially launched in 2012, it was not only a short-lived project with a fancy name, but a genuine theatre movement.

Chan Ping-chiu was not the only one who observed the bottleneck in original writing in the local theatre after the millennium. In 2006, Prospects Theatre, Theatre Ensemble and the Hong Kong Arts Centre collaborated on a project called *Crouching Tigers and Hidden Dragons in the Theatre*. The project initiated a surprising "quantitative change"—a total of 17 original scripts were presented at the play readings that were held during the first year of the project. At the time, experienced playwright Poon Wai-sum was the artistic director of Prospects Theatre. In an interview, he remarks:

"The purpose of the project is to spotlight scriptwriting, in and outside of the theatre circle".³ From this perspective, *Crouching Tigers and Hidden Dragons* was conceived as a search for (new) playwrights by established playwrights. Both Chan and Poon shared this vision. On the other hand, Chan was focused on the poetics of theatre writing, whereas Poon was more concerned about the difficult conditions faced by local playwrights in both their lives and artistic practices. Compared to Contemporary Writing for Theatre, *Crouching Tigers and Hidden Dragons* is less experimental or exploratory in its aesthetics. However, it has a more refined focus as a creative platform—it has facilitated the creation of a number of original and stageable plays. In the past decade plus, *Crouching Tigers and Hidden Dragons* has nurtured many playwrights, such as Tang Sai-cheong, Wu King-yeung, Li Wing-lui, and Ivan Kwok. They have since participated in many productions by HKADC-funded theatre companies, or in The Open Platform series that was launched by Hong Kong Repertory Theatre in 2013. This quantitative change is certainly the most significant result of the *Crouching Tigers and Hidden Dragons* project.

Compared to the singular focus of *Crouching Tigers and Hidden Dragons*, Contemporary Writing for Theatre was conceived with a broader mission: "To bring an innovative conception of text into a sweeping exploration of theatre making that encompasses directing, performance aesthetics, theatre design and production". There have been many playwright incubator projects modelled after *Crouching Tigers and Hidden Dragons*. By contrast, there have not been any programmes that follow the model of Contemporary Writing for Theatre, which includes translation, research, play reading, playwriting, workshops, seminars, publication, exchange programmes, guided drama appreciation and archival collection (The Postdramatic Theatre Laboratory, launched by the Alice Theatre Laboratory in 2018, may be comparable to Contemporary Writing for Theatre to a limited extent). In addition, Contemporary Writing for Theatre was distinctive in how it urged its participants to confront, connect with, and question reality. Despite some of its limitations, the movement has had a definite impact on contemporary Chinese-language theatre in Hong Kong's neighbouring regions such as Macau and Taipei. There are two types of playwrights that have emerged from this movement. The first type includes Vee Leong, Janice Poon, Yan Pat-to, Cally Yu, and Tang Ching-kin, who are active in both theatre making and art criticism; the second type includes Wu King-yeung, Li Wing-lui, Fong Ki-tuen, and Birdy Wong Ching-yan, who are devoted to theatre making. If we include Chan Ping-chiu on the list, we can see that Contemporary Writing for Theatre was not only

³ "The Bourgeoning of Translation and Adaptation in the Theatre—Are We Witnessing the Death of the Original Plays?", *Wen Wei Po*, 5 March 2006: <http://paper.wenweipo.com/2006/03/05/YC0603050001.htm>

a search for (new) playwrights, but it was more of a creative alliance. These theatre makers have produced many provocative works in recent years, such as Vee Leong's *Claustrophobia* (2017), Yan Pat-to's *A Concise History of Future* (2016) and *Goldfish of Berlin* (2019), Cally Yu's *Ink Maze* (2018) and Birdy Wong's *Tête-bêche* (2018). These productions explore theatrical language and aesthetics, challenge existing aesthetic concepts and envision the theatre of the future. They are testimony to the impact of Contemporary Writing for Theatre as a theatre movement.

In fact, Chan Ping-chiu initiated another groundbreaking movement, which was the establishment of On & On Cattle Depot Theatre in 2001. Cattle Depot Theatre is an iconic case in the operation of a public performance venue by an independent arts group in Hong Kong, and it has also become an important venue for Hong Kong's experimental theatre. At its inception, it broke away from the shackles of government-run performance venues, and opened up new possibilities in performance and scenography. In the first decade of the millennium, Cattle Depot Theatre pioneered the establishment of small-sized, independent performance venues by local theatre groups. It also witnessed an increase in the number of experimental theatre performances. This movement gained greater momentum when Chan Chu-hei launched the Hong Kong People's Fringe Festival in 2012. The festival took inspiration from the Edinburgh Festival Fringe in its open-access format, as it emphasised artist-initiated performances and their creative exchange with local sites. At the peak of the festival, there were over 40 unofficial performance sites. Chan Chu-hei graduated from the HKAPA in the early 1990s, and he established Theatre Horizon in 2006. He was also a key figure in inspiring local independent theatres to set up their studios in industrial buildings as performance venues.

Although the Hong Kong People's Fringe Festival was only held four times, it attracted the participation of various young artists and interdisciplinary artists. Sadly, underground performance venues in industrial buildings have been dying out in recent years, due to legal restrictions and unsuccessful negotiations with the government. The Hong Kong People's Fringe Festival could not possibly survive without these unofficial performance venues. It seems that young artists are losing their new-found opportunities for learning and practice in experimental theatre. In the introduction to the New Directors' Movement, the following observation is made: "In recent years, Hong Kong is enjoying an increase in the number of theatre productions. Many training programmes with aims to nurture local new playwrights and actors are being run. And yet new directors are constantly in short supply".⁴ It is true that in addition to the HKAPA's academic programmes, there are numerous

⁴ The New Directors' Movement by Theatre Horizon: http://www.theatrehorizon.com/2017/faustushp_e.html

courses and workshops on performance-related training. For example, the HKAPA EXCEL offers short-term programmes in performance. Since 2012, Hong Kong Repertory Theatre and the Li Ka Shing School of Professional and Continuing Education of the Open University of Hong Kong have jointly organised the Professional Certificate in Stage Performance programme. Drama Gallery, an HKADC-funded theatre company, has run quarterly courses for almost ten years. A non-government-funded theatre, The Whole Theatre Limited (formerly Wanchai Theatre) has also offered performance-related courses since 2008. In 2016, Radix Troupe introduced the Full-time All-round Theatre Certificate Training. In 2014, Tang Shu-Wing Studio launched the Physical Theatre Institute, which emphasises the cross-cultural aspects of performance.

By contrast, much less is offered for aspiring directors, as training in directing requires greater resources in terms of learning and practice. Apart from the HKAPA's academic programmes, there are occasional workshops on directing run by theatre companies. In addition, these workshops are not designed with the long-term development of new directors in the local theatre ecology in mind. In collaboration with Lam Lap-sam, Chung Ying Theatre Company has been hosting the Director Workshop & Open Lecture since 2009. Selected excerpts of students' works are performed in a small-sized theatre. Some alumni of the workshop have continued to create new works, or have formed their own theatre companies. There is a screening process for admission, in which applicants are required to submit a proposal and attend an interview. The six-month workshop focuses on the fundamentals of directing, and it is open to participants from diverse backgrounds. It does not address the levels of professionalism or understanding of the local theatre ecology that its participants may be able to achieve. On the other hand, while the New Directors' Movement also did not set out to address any specific issues, its target participants were HKAPA graduates who majored in directing from the past five years. For instance, Donald Chung and Tang Ho-wai both graduated in 2014, while Chow Wai-chuen and Wong Chun-ho graduated in 2015. There were also specific requirements for participants' works. Each aspiring director had to present a production in a medium-sized theatre, and it must be an adaptation of a classic rather than an original work. The directors were also mentored by scholars and experienced critics from different backgrounds throughout the process. All this reflected a strategically conceived attempt to fill in the gaps in the professional practice of directors in the present theatre ecology. It was an opportunity for new directors to gain experience in theatre making, and to further their grasp of aesthetics as well as the research and reinterpretation of the classics. In this sense, the New Directors' Movement had a broader and more sustainable vision than other projects that were conceived as a search for new talents by established directors.

The New Directors' Movement was conducted in six-month phases. A total of four productions, namely *Faustus*, *Peer Gynt*, *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui*, and *Mourning Becomes Electra*, were presented in a medium-sized theatre with a seating capacity of around 400. At the awards ceremony, all the four directors said it was challenging to work on a classic play, and the New Directors' Movement gave them a rare opportunity to experiment with it. They also mentioned the importance of supporting each other—not just among the directors, but the designers and actors as well—reviewing each other's work and exchanging ideas. The creative energy gathered in the New Directors' Movement is not unlike that of Contemporary Writing for Theatre. In 2018, On & On Theatre Workshop celebrated its 20th anniversary with a series of programmes, 20&ON IN FULL



Faustus (2017)— Photo: Ng King Lung Photo courtesy: Theatre Horizon

BLOSSOM. The series could be viewed as the conclusion to the second stage of Contemporary Writing for Theatre. In the foreword to the series, Chan Ping-chiu writes: “It takes 20 years for a generation to grow up”. He concludes that “around the handover in the mid-1990s, we saw the rise of small-sized professional theatre companies in Hong Kong”, and that these groups have become “an indispensable part of Hong Kong theatre”. This is a poignant reflection on the ideal of “movement as strategy” in Contemporary Writing for Theatre: These small-sized theatre companies matter in that “motivated by the quest for cultural identity and societal resources, these arts groups strive to break new ground while developing their unique artistic styles”.⁵

With the dramatic shifts that are happening in terms of our cultural identity and societal resources, how do we envisage and develop Hong Kong theatre in the next 20 years? The question no longer centres on how to create more opportunities for local artists within the existing ecology and aesthetic framework. Rather, we must ponder how to open up greater possibilities for the new generation to build a more vital and imaginative theatre that engages with the times. This is a vision shared by Chan Ping-chiu and Chan Chu-hei, as well as some other artists of their generation. In the pamphlet of the New Directors' Movement, Chan Chu-hei writes: “[The movement seeks to] to provide [new directors] with a free platform, where they can experiment with different elements in a steadfast and daring manner, build on their knowledge and experiences, and develop their resilience in the face of an unknown future”. The two theatre movements have fostered ongoing exchange and encouragement between two generations of theatre artists, and their impact will continue to resound in the local theatre of the future.

(Translated by Shi Huiwen)

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⁵ 20&ON IN FULL BLOSSOM by On & On Theatre Workshop: <https://www.20andon.com/20-on>

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